BACKGROUND-

Trading Places

Before the arrival of the Europeans, the Wabanaki had what we in today's jargon would call a "resource-based" economy. What they needed came from the land–stone for tools, wood for fires and wigwams, animal furs and skins for clothes, and animals and plants for food. These people left no written record, but the stories in their oral tradition tell us that remaining in balance with the natural world was important to them–they recognized the need to preserve and care for their resources. The science of archaeology gives us another way of looking at how people lived in the past. It gives us a brief and tantalizing glimpse of life long ago, and some hints of possible economic relationships between different groups of people.

According to the archaeological record, the earliest known inhabitants of Maine followed the retreating glaciers northward some 12,000 years ago. Archaeologists call the following period between 12,000 and 9,500 years ago the Paleoindian Period. The people of the Paleoindian Period were skilled flint knappers, makers of beautiful and functional stone tools, and they clearly valued certain types of fine-grained, colorful stone for this work. When they arrived in a new area, evidence suggests that they quickly located the best stone, but the presence in Maine Paleoindian sites of tools made from stone not native to the area indicates the likelihood of trade. It is not at all impossible that ideas and technologies were "traded" along with raw materials and finished tools, but this is a matter for speculation. In contrast, tools from the later Early Archaic Period (about 9,500 years ago) are made from local stone, which would seem to indicate less interaction with distant groups.

In the Early Ceramic Period (about 3,000 years ago), people traded with groups perhaps as far away as the Midwest for ceremonial objects, similar to those of the Adena culture of the Ohio Valley. By about 1,000 years ago, there is much more archaeological evidence for long-distance trade. People in Maine were making and using arrowheads and scrapers made from high quality chert from Labrador, northern Quebec, and western New York and Ontario. They were also using jasper from Pennsylvania and chalcedony from Nova Scotia. Native copper from western Nova Scotia is also found in Maine sites, made into ornaments and tools like small awls.

At one site on the central Maine coast at Blue Hill Bay, over 20% of the tools found were made from non-native stone. Probably the most interesting artifact found at this site (and certainly the most famous) is a Norse coin. Research has shown that it is authentic, and that it was minted between 1065 and 1080 AD. While some people see this as evidence of an early Viking presence on the Maine coast, the more likely and reasonable explanation is that it arrived on the shores of Blue Hill Bay through trade. This conclusion is supported because the site also contains tools made from Ramah chert from Labrador and at least one stone tool made in the style of the Dorset Culture, a prehistoric Eskimo people. This is evidence that before European arrival, Native people living in coastal Maine had long-distance relationships through trade with people living far to the north.

An interesting associated hypothesis is that the sharp increase in tools made from non-native stone in the late Ceramic Period was made possible by the development of the birchbark canoe. It is likely that birchbark canoes replaced the more cumbersome dug out canoes somewhere around this time, and would have been more maneuverable on inland lakes and streams–an asset on long trading trips to the interior.

When Europeans began exploring the Gulf of Maine in the early 1600s, they found the people living there were already using European goods. A member of Bartholomew Gosnold's 1602 expedition to the Maine coast reported meeting "...six Indians in a baske shallop with a mast and saile, an iron grapple, and a kettle of copper [who] came boldly aboard us, one of them apparrelled with a waistcoat and breeches of black serge, made after our sea fashion, hose and shoes on his feet....from some words and signs they made [we concluded] that some baske or [other vessel] of St. John do Luz [had] fished or traded in this place." Clearly, these Maine Natives had been in contact and traded with Europeans, and it was not unreasonable to assume that these Europeans were Basque or Breton fishermen.

Recent reevaluation of contemporary European accounts, however, indicates that this was probably not the case. There were very few voyages to the Gulf of Maine before 1600, probably none before the 1520s. These were for exploration rather than trade, and so could not be responsible for the quantity of trade goods that were already incorporated into Native culture by 1600. There are two possible sources of these trade goods. The people identified by Europeans as *Etchemins (the probable ancestors of today's Penobscot, Passamaquoddy and Maliseet peoples) were involved directly in the fur trade on the St. Lawrence, bringing at least small quantities of French trade goods from Quebec down into Maine. Even more importantly, the *Souriquois, also referred to as the Tarrentines (the likely ancestors of the Micmacs), were sailing European-style boats called shallops along the entire Maine coast by the early 1600s, acting as middlemen and trading goods obtained from the French on the St. Lawrence for furs.

There are indications that the Souriquois may have sailed as far south as Massachusetts Bay, where Champlain reports Native people using iron hatchets they obtained in trade from "the Indians of the Acadian coast." Another valued trade item was wampum, purple and white shell beads, which originated in southern New England. It is unlikely, however, that the Souriquois actually sailed further south than Massachusetts Bay.

The trade in the Gulf of Maine run by the Souriquois middlemen may well have built upon trade patterns that existed before the arrival of Europeans. It is likely that the Indian-French trade network was already decades old when Gosnold's men first described it in the early 1600s. Maine Native peoples were much more active participants in long-distance trade networks than was previously realized.

(Footnote)

* "Etchemin" and "Souriquois" were names or terms for Native groups recorded by Champlain during his 1604 excursions along the coast of Maine. The descendents of Etchemin and Souriquois are the present-day Wabanaki.

Early trading encounters between Europeans and Native people were often subject to cultural misunderstandings. Native people had a tradition of mutually-beneficial exchange while European traders were usually motivated by a desire for profit, either for themselves or for their employers back in England or France. Native trading was often preceded by ceremonial gift giving, and Europeans, not understanding this, offended the Indians by refusing as trade goods what the Indians intended as gifts, thus losing opportunities for trade.

By the late 1600s, the nature and quality of European-Native trade relationships changed drastically as all Europe went "fashion-crazy" for hats made of felt from beaver fur. European beaver was soon trapped out, and people turned west to the New World for beaver skins. The Souriquois middlemen in the Gulf of Maine were soon replaced by European traders. In this booming market, coastal trade from ships was replaced by a series of permanent settlements and trading posts. The basis for their economic well-being thus eroded, some Souriquois became raiders, attacking Native villages along the southern Maine coast for food supplies and furs.

The explosive growth of the fur trade was disastrous for Native people. It brought with it disease which wiped out a large percentage of the Native population. Competition between Native groups for trade with Europeans led to unprecedented rivalries, which, facilitated by the introduction of European firearms, frequently became deadly. Eastern and western Wabanaki groups began raiding each other's villages. Unscrupulous traders often included liquor in their trade goods, and alcoholism became a growing problem. Spending more and more of their time hunting furs for trade, Native people became dependent on European trade goods and foods, and so were tied into the larger European colonial economies, which responded to factors all too frequently beyond their control.

Although these were times of rapid and dislocating cultural change, Native people showed their resiliency by adapting and surviving. Trade did provide a bridge (albeit an unequal one) between Native people and Europeans in the overlapping French, English and Indian economies. Native people incorporated European material goods into their lives, and developed new technologies, while maintaining strong ties to their traditional ways.

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Other Resources

Teachers Guide, Curriculum Guide and Student Handouts for "Teaching Tools, Maine Prehistoric Archaeology Teacher Resource Kit," by Archaeological Research Consultants, Inc., Ellsworth, ME, 1997. ***[See especially Student Handout #27, "The Gathering."]***